

# King David Hotel bombing

The **King David Hotel bombing** was a terrorist attack<sup>[1][2][3][4][5][6][7][8]</sup> carried out on Monday, July 22, 1946, by the militant right-wing<sup>[9]</sup> Zionist underground organization, the Irgun, on the British administrative headquarters for Palestine, which was housed in the southern wing<sup>[10]</sup> of the King David Hotel in Jerusalem.<sup>[11][12][13]</sup> Ninety-one people of various nationalities were killed and 46 injured.<sup>[14]</sup>

The hotel was the site of the central offices of the British Mandatory authorities of Palestine, principally the Secretariat of the Government of Palestine and the Headquarters of the British Armed Forces in Palestine and Transjordan.<sup>[14][15]</sup> When planned, the attack had the approval of the Haganah, the principal Jewish paramilitary group in Palestine, though, unbeknownst to the Irgun, this had been cancelled by the time the operation was carried out. It was conceived as part of a response to Operation Agatha (a series of widespread raids, including one on the Jewish Agency, conducted by the British authorities) and was the deadliest directed at the British during the Mandate era (1920–1948).<sup>[14][15]</sup>

Disguised as Arab workmen and as hotel waiters, members of the Irgun planted a bomb in the basement of the main building of the hotel, whose southern wing housed the Mandate Secretariat and a few offices of the British military headquarters. The resulting explosion caused the collapse of the western half of the southern wing of the hotel.<sup>[15]</sup> Some of the inflicted deaths and injuries occurred in the road outside the hotel and in adjacent buildings.<sup>[15]</sup>

The Irgun sent warnings by telephone, including one to the hotel's own switchboard, which, possibly because hoax bomb warnings were rife at the time, the staff decided to ignore, but none directly to the British authorities.<sup>[15]</sup> From the fact that a bomb search had already been carried out, it appears that a hoax call or tip-off had been received at the hotel earlier that day.<sup>[14]</sup> Subsequent telephone calls from a concerned *Palestine Post* staff member and the police caused increasing alarm, and the hotel manager was notified. In the closing minutes before the explosion, he called an unknown British officer, but no evacuation was ordered.<sup>[15]</sup> Controversy has arisen over the timing and adequacy of the warnings and, based on the not necessarily true assumption that the number of people in the blast zone would have been reduced, the reasons why the hotel was not evacuated.<sup>[15]</sup>

King David Hotel Bombing

Part of the Jewish insurgency in Palestine



The hotel after the bombing

Location	Jerusalem, Mandatory Palestine
Date	July 22, 1946 12:37 pm (UTC+2)
Target	King David Hotel
Attack type	Bombing
Deaths	91
Non-fatal injuries	46
Perpetrators	Irgun

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## Background

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### Motivation for the bombing

The Irgun committed the attack in response to Operation Agatha, known in Israel as "Black Saturday".<sup>[16]</sup> British troops had searched the Jewish Agency on June 29 and confiscated large quantities of documents directly implicating the Haganah in the Jewish insurgency against Britain. The intelligence information was taken to the King David Hotel,<sup>[17]</sup> where it was initially kept in the offices of the Secretariat in the southern wing. In order to destroy the incriminating documentation, the Irgun therefore determined to destroy that wing of the hotel.

### Hotel layout

In plan form, the six-story hotel, which was opened in 1932 as the first, modern, luxury hotel in Jerusalem,<sup>[18]</sup> had an I-shape, with a long central axis connecting wings to the north and south. Julian's Way, a main road, ran parallel and close to the west side of the hotel. An unsurfaced lane, where the French Consulate was situated and from where access to the service entrance of the hotel was gained, ran from there past the north end of the hotel. Gardens and an olive grove, which had been designated as a park, surrounded the other sides.<sup>[14]</sup>



Zionist leaders arrested in Operation Agatha. Left to right: David Remez, Moshe Sharett, Yitzhak Gruenbaum, Dov Yosef, Shenkarsky, David Hachohen, Halperin.

## Government and military usage

In 1946, the Secretariat occupied most of the southern wing of the hotel, with the military headquarters occupying the top floor of the south wing and the top, second and third floors of the middle of the hotel.<sup>[19]</sup> The military telephone exchange was situated in the basement.<sup>[14][15]</sup> An annexe housed the military police and a branch of the Criminal Investigation Department of the Palestine Police.<sup>[18]</sup>

Rooms had first been requisitioned in the hotel in late 1938, on what was supposed to be a temporary basis. Plans had already been made to erect a permanent building for the Secretariat and Army GHQ, but these were cancelled after the Second World War broke out, at which point more than two-thirds of the hotel's rooms were being used for government and army purposes.<sup>[14]</sup>

In March 1946, British Labour Party MP Richard Crossman gave the following description of activity at the hotel: "private detectives, Zionist agents, Arab sheiks, special correspondents, and the rest, all sitting around about discreetly overhearing each other."<sup>[20]</sup> Security analyst Bruce Hoffman has written that the hotel "housed the nerve centre of British rule in Palestine".<sup>[21]</sup>

## Previous attacks

Amichai Paglin, Chief of Operations of the Irgun, developed a remote-controlled mortar with a range of four miles, which was nicknamed the V3 by British military engineers. In 1945, after attacks using the mortar had been made on several police stations, six V3s were buried in the olive grove park south of the King David Hotel. Three were aimed at the government printing press and three at the hotel itself.<sup>[14]</sup> The intention was to fire them on the King's birthday, but the Haganah learned about the plan and warned the British through Teddy Kollek of the Jewish Agency. Army sappers then dug them up. On another occasion, members of an unknown group threw grenades, which missed, at the hotel.<sup>[14]</sup>

# Preparations for the attack

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## Planning

The leaders of Haganah opposed the idea initially.<sup>[20]</sup> On July 1, 1946, Moshe Sneh, chief of the Haganah General Headquarters, sent a letter to the then leader of the Irgun, Menachem Begin, which instructed him to "carry out the operation at the 'chick'", code for the King David Hotel.<sup>[note 1]</sup> Despite this approval for the project, repeated delays in executing the operation were requested by the Haganah, in response to changes unfolding in the political situation. The plan was finalized between Amichai Paglin (Irgun alias 'Gidi'), Chief of Operations of the Irgun, and Itzhak Sadeh, commander of the Palmach.<sup>[15]</sup>

In the plan, Irgun men, disguised as Arabs, except for Gideon, the leader, who would be dressed as one of the hotel's distinctive Sudanese waiters, would enter the building through a basement service entrance carrying the explosives concealed in milk cans. The cans were to be placed by the main columns supporting the wing where the majority of the offices used by the British authorities were located. The columns were in a basement nightclub known as the Régence.<sup>[15]</sup> In the final review of the plan, it was decided that the attack would take place on July 22 at 11:00, a time when there would be no people in the coffee shop in the basement in the area where the bomb was to be planted.<sup>[20]</sup> It would be possible to enter the hotel more easily at that time as well.<sup>[15]</sup>

It would have been impossible to have planted the bomb in the Régence any later than 14:00 because it was always full of customers after that time.<sup>[14]</sup> The timing was also determined by the original intention that the attack should coincide with another, carried out by the Lehi, on government offices at the David Brothers Building. However, that attack, codenamed

"Operation Your Slave and Redeemer", was canceled at the last moment. The Irgun said details of the plan were aimed at minimizing civilian casualties. Irgun reports allegedly included explicit precautions so that the whole area would be evacuated.<sup>[22]</sup> This led to recriminations between the Haganah and Irgun later. The Haganah said that they had specified that the attack should take place later in the day, when the offices would have been emptier of people.<sup>[15]</sup>

## Warnings

Since the bombing, much controversy has ensued over the issues of when warnings were sent and how the British authorities responded. Irgun representatives have always stated that the warning was given well in advance of the explosion, so that adequate time was available to evacuate the hotel. Menachem Begin, for example, wrote that the telephone message was delivered 25–27 minutes before the explosion.<sup>[23]</sup> It is often stated that the British authorities have always denied that a warning was sent. However, what the British Government said, five months after the bombing, once the subsequent inquest and all the inquiries had been completed, was not that no warning had been sent, but that no such warning had been received by anyone at the Secretariat "in an official position with any power to take action."<sup>[24]</sup>



Rear of the hotel, 1931

American author Thurston Clarke's analysis of the bombing gave timings for calls and for the explosion, which he said took place at 12:37. He stated that as part of the Irgun plan, a sixteen-year-old recruit, Adina Hay (alias Tehia), was to make three warning calls before the attack. At 12:22 the first call was made, in both Hebrew and English, to a telephone operator on the hotel's switchboard (the Secretariat and the military each had their own, separate, telephone exchanges). It was ignored.<sup>[14]</sup> At 12:27, the second warning call was made to the French Consulate adjacent to the hotel to the north-east. This second call was taken seriously, and staff went through the building opening windows and closing curtains to lessen the impact of the blast. At 12:31 a third and final warning call to the *Palestine Post* newspaper was made. The telephone operator called the Palestine Police CID to report the message. She then called the hotel switchboard. The hotel operator reported the threat to one of the hotel managers. This warning resulted in the discovery of the milk cans in the basement, but by then it was too late.<sup>[14]</sup>

Begin claimed in his memoirs that the British had deliberately not evacuated so that they could vilify the Jewish militant groups.

## Leaks and rumours

Shortly after noon Palestine time, the London UPI bureau received a short message stating that 'Jewish terrorists have just blown up the King David Hotel!'. The UPI stringer who had sent it, an Irgun member, had wanted to scoop his colleagues. Not knowing that the operation had been postponed by an hour, he sent the message before the operation had been completed. The bureau chief decided against running the story until more details and further confirmation had been obtained. There were other leaks.<sup>[14]</sup>

## Execution

The perpetrators met at 7 am at the Beit Aharon Talmud Torah. This was the first time they were informed of the target. The attack used approximately 350 kg (770 lb) of explosives spread over six charges. According to Begin, due to "consultations" about the cancellation of the attack on the David Brothers Building, the operation was delayed and started at about 12:00, an hour later than planned.<sup>[23]</sup>

After placing the bombs in the La Regence Cafe,<sup>[25]</sup> the Irgun men quickly slipped out and detonated a small explosive in the street outside the hotel, reportedly to keep passers-by away from the area.<sup>[23]</sup> The police report written in the aftermath of the bombing says that this explosion resulted in a higher death toll because it caused spectators from the hotel to gather in its south-west corner, directly over the bomb planted in its basement. The first explosion also caused the presence in the hotel of injured Arabs who were brought into the Secretariat after their bus, which had been passing, was rolled onto its side.<sup>[15]</sup> The Arab workers in the kitchen fled after being told to do so.<sup>[22]</sup>

During the attack, two Irgun casualties occurred, Avraham Abramovitz and Itzhak Tsadok. In one Irgun account of the bombing, by Katz, the two were shot during the initial approach on the hotel, when a minor gunfight ensued with two British soldiers who had become suspicious.<sup>[22]</sup> The Irgun did not explain how the group would have been able to move 350 kg of home-made explosives into the hotel with the guards already alerted. In Yehuda Lapidot's account, the men were shot as they were withdrawing after the attack.<sup>[26]</sup> The latter agrees with the version of events presented by Bethell and Thurston Clarke and is more credible. According to Bethell, Abramovitz managed to get to the taxi getaway car along with six other men. Tsadok escaped with the other men on foot. Both were found by the police in the Jewish Old Quarter of Jerusalem the next day, with Abramovitz already dead from his wounds.<sup>[14][15]</sup>

## Explosion and aftermath

The explosion occurred at 12:37. It caused the collapse of the western half of the southern wing of the hotel. Soon after the explosion, rescuers from the Royal Engineers arrived with heavy lifting equipment. Later that night, the sappers were formed into three groups, with each working an eight-hour shift. The rescue operation lasted for the next three days and 2,000 lorry loads of rubble were removed. From the wreckage and rubble the rescuers managed to extract six survivors. The last to be found alive was Assistant Secretary Downing C. Thompson, 31 hours after the explosion, but he died just over a week later.<sup>[27]</sup>

Ninety-one people were killed, most of them being staff of the hotel or Secretariat: 21 were first-rank government officials; 49 were second-rank clerks, typists and messengers, junior members of the Secretariat, employees of the hotel and canteen workers; 13 were soldiers; 3 policemen; and 5 were members of the public. By nationality, there were 41 Arabs, 28 British citizens, 17 Palestinian Jews, 2 Armenians, 1 Russian, 1 Greek and 1 Egyptian. 46 people were injured.<sup>[14][15]</sup> Some of the deaths and injuries occurred in the road outside the hotel and in adjacent buildings. No identifiable traces were found of thirteen of those killed.<sup>[14]</sup> Among the dead were Yulius Jacobs, an Irgun sympathizer,<sup>[22]</sup> and Edward Sperling, a Zionist writer and government official. Immediately after the bombing the Mandate government began planning Operation Shark.

## Reactions

### British reactions



The explosion of a second bomb at the King David Hotel



British paratroopers enforce curfew in Tel Aviv after King David Hotel bombing, July 1946. Photographer: Haim Fine, Russian Emmanuel collection, from collections of the National Library of Israel.

The bombing inflamed public opinion in Britain. After the bombing, editorials in British newspapers argued that the bombing deflated statements by the government that it had been winning against the Jewish paramilitaries. *The Manchester Guardian* argued that "British firmness" inside Palestine had brought about more terrorism and worsened the situation in the country, the opposite effect that the government had intended.<sup>[21]</sup>

Speaker after speaker in the House of Commons expressed outrage. Ex-Prime Minister Winston Churchill, a prominent and enthusiastic supporter of Zionism, criticized the attack. He also related the bombing to the problems within the Mandate system, and he advocated allowing further Jewish immigration into Palestine.<sup>[28]</sup> Chief Secretary for the Government of Palestine, Sir John Shaw, noted that the majority of the dead had been members of his own personal staff. He said, "British, Arabs, Jews, Greeks, Armenians; senior officers, police, my orderly, my chauffeur, messengers, guards, men and women—young and old—they were my friends."



British premier Clement Attlee

British Prime Minister Clement Attlee commented in the House of Commons:

"Hon. Members will have learned with horror of the brutal and murderous crime committed yesterday in Jerusalem. Of all the outrages which have occurred in Palestine, and they have been many and horrible in the last few months, this is the worst. By this insane act of terrorism 93 innocent people have been killed or are missing in the ruins. The latest figures of casualties are 41 dead, 52 missing and 53 injured. I have no further information at present beyond what is contained in the following official report received from Jerusalem:"

"It appears that after exploding a small bomb in the street, presumably as a diversionary measure—this did virtually no damage—a lorry drove up to the tradesmen's entrance of the King David Hotel and the occupants, after holding up the staff at pistol point, entered the kitchen premises carrying a number of milk cans. At some stage of the proceedings, they shot and seriously wounded a British soldier who attempted to interfere with them. All available information so far is to the effect that they were Jews. Somewhere in the basement of the hotel they planted bombs which went off shortly afterwards. They appear to have made good their escape."

"Every effort is being made to identify and arrest the perpetrators of this outrage. The work of rescue in the debris, which was immediately organised, still continues. The next-of-kin of casualties are being notified by telegram as soon as accurate information is available. The House will wish to express their profound sympathy with the relatives of the killed and with those injured in this dastardly outrage."<sup>[29]</sup>

In a visit made sometime before the attack, Field Marshal Sir Bernard Montgomery, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS), the professional head of the British Army, had told Lieutenant General Sir Evelyn Barker, the General Officer Commanding (GOC) of the British Forces in Palestine and Trans-Jordan, to emphasise to the British servicemen that they were "facing a cruel, fanatical and cunning enemy, and there was no way of knowing who was friend and who foe."<sup>[30]</sup> Since there were female terrorists as well, according to Montgomery, all fraternising with the local population would have to cease.<sup>[30]</sup> Within a few minutes of the bombing, Barker translated this instruction into an order that "all Jewish places of entertainment, cafes, restaurants, shops and private dwellings" be out of bounds to all ranks. He concluded, "I appreciate that these measures will inflict some hardship on the troops, but I am certain that if my reasons are fully explained to

them, they will understand their propriety and they will be punishing the Jews in a way the race dislikes as much as any, by striking at their pockets and showing our contempt of them." His wording was interpreted as antisemitic and caused much outrage. The order was rescinded two weeks later.

The attack did not change Britain's stance toward an Anglo-American agreement on Palestine, which was then in its concluding phase. In a letter dated July 25, 1946, Prime Minister Attlee wrote to American President Harry S. Truman: "I am sure you will agree that the inhuman crime committed in Jerusalem on 22 July calls for the strongest action against terrorism but having regard to the sufferings of the innocent Jewish victims of Nazism this should not deter us from introducing a policy designed to bring peace to Palestine with the least possible delay."<sup>[31]</sup>

## Israeli and Zionist reactions

The Jewish political leadership publicly condemned the attack. The Jewish Agency expressed "their feelings of horror at the base and unparalleled act perpetrated today by a gang of criminals", despite the fact that the Irgun was acting in response to the Jewish Resistance Movement, an organisation governed by the Jewish Agency. The Jewish National Council denounced the bombing.<sup>[17]</sup> According to *The Jerusalem Post*, "although the Hagana had sanctioned the King David bombing, world-wide condemnation caused the organization to distance itself from the attack."<sup>[16]</sup> David Ben-Gurion deemed the Irgun "the enemy of the Jewish people" after the attack.<sup>[32]</sup> *Hatsofeh*, a Jewish newspaper in Palestine, labelled the Irgun perpetrators "fascists".<sup>[33]</sup>

The Irgun issued an initial statement accepting responsibility for the attack, mourning their Jewish victims, and calling into fault the British for what they saw as a failure to respond to the warnings. A year later, on July 22, 1947, they issued a new statement saying that they were acting on instructions from "a letter from the headquarters of the United Resistance, demanding that we carry out an attack on the center of government at the King David Hotel as soon as possible." The Irgun's radio network announced that it would mourn for the Jewish victims, but not the British ones. This was explained by claiming that Britain had not mourned for the millions of Jews who died in the Nazi Holocaust. No remorse was expressed for the largest group of victims, the Arab dead.<sup>[18]</sup>

Richard Crossman, a British Labour Party MP, whose experience on the Anglo-American Committee had made him sympathetic to Zionism, visited Chaim Weizmann shortly after the attack. Weizmann's ambivalence towards Zionist violence was apparent in the conversation. While condemning it, he also stated that he sympathised with its causes. When the King David Hotel bombing was mentioned, Weizmann started crying heavily. He said, "I can't help feeling proud of our boys. If only it had been a German headquarters, they would have gotten the Victoria Cross."<sup>[14]</sup>

## Sir John Shaw controversy

At the time of the explosion, Chief Secretary, Sir John Shaw was in his office, which was in the eastern half of the south wing, rather than the destroyed western half.<sup>[15][34]</sup> Jewish militant organisations sought to shift the blame to Shaw for the deaths.

Begin said that Shaw had been responsible for the failure to evacuate the hotel: "A police officer called Shaw and told him, 'The Jews say that they have placed bombs in the King David.' And the reply was, 'I am here to give orders to the Jews, not to take orders from them.'"<sup>[15]</sup> The 1947 Irgun pamphlet *Black Paper* said that Shaw had forbidden anyone to leave the hotel: "For reasons best known to himself Shaw, the Chief Secretary of the Occupation administration, disregarded the warning. That is, he forbade any of the other officials to leave the building, with the result that some of his collaborators were killed, while he himself slunk away until after the explosion. ... Shaw thus sent nearly 100 people to their deaths—including Hebrews, including friends of our struggle."<sup>[15]</sup> Begin said that he had heard the information about Shaw from Israel Galili, Chief of Staff of Haganah, when they met on July 23, the day after the bombing.<sup>[15]</sup> In an interview with



Bethell,<sup>[14]</sup> Galili said that his source for the Shaw story had been Boris Guriel, the future head of Israel's intelligence service, who had heard it in turn from the American Associated Press bureau chief Carter Davidson. Thurston Clarke interviewed both Galili and Guriel, the former in 1977. Guriel denied that he had been the source of the story. Galili was unable to produce any evidence that Shaw had received a warning.<sup>[14]</sup> Carter Davidson died in 1958<sup>[14][15]</sup> and so could not be asked to confirm or deny what Galili had said. Clarke's assessment was that the story about Shaw was, in fact, "a baseless rumour promoted by the Haganah in order to mollify the Irgun and fix responsibility for the carnage on Shaw."<sup>[14]</sup> Shmuel Katz, who had been a member of the Irgun's high command, later also wrote that "the story can be dismissed."<sup>[22]</sup>

In 1948, a libel action was taken out by Shaw against a Jewish London newspaper which repeated the allegations made by Begin and the Irgun pamphlet.<sup>[15]</sup> The newspaper did not mount a defence and made an unreserved apology to Shaw.<sup>[15]</sup> About the allegation that he had said that he did not take orders from Jews, Shaw said: "I would never have made a statement like that and I don't think that anyone who knows me would regard it as in character. I would never have referred to the Jews in that way".<sup>[15]</sup>

Also in 1948, William Ziff, an American author, released a revised edition of his 1938 book *The Rape of Palestine* which contained an embellished version of Galili's story, similar to the one given in the *Black Paper* pamphlet.<sup>[14]</sup> It said that Shaw had escaped from the hotel minutes before the main explosion, abandoning its other occupants to their fate.<sup>[14]</sup> Shaw took out another libel action against Ziff and his British publisher. After lawyers in Israel failed to find evidence supporting Ziff's version of events, the book's publishers withdrew it from circulation and apologised to Shaw.<sup>[14]</sup>

*The Revolt*, Menachem Begin's book on the Irgun, which was published in Britain in 1951, made references to a "high official" having received a warning but refusing to evacuate the hotel in time. Shaw, believing this to be a reference to himself, seriously considered suing Begin and his British publisher for libel, and consulted with his personal attorney, but was advised against it, on grounds that a reference to a "high official" was insufficient to justify a claim of personal defamation. He did, however, write a letter to the publisher denying the book's version of events.<sup>[35]</sup>

Bethell says that all of the British witnesses who were in the vicinity of the hotel at the time of the explosion confirmed what Shaw said. None of them had any knowledge of a warning having been sent in time to make evacuation of the hotel possible. They said that, like themselves, Shaw had not known about the bomb beforehand and that he bore no responsibility for putting colleagues' lives at risk immediately before the explosion. The only criticism made was that Shaw should have closed the Régence restaurant and put guards on the service entrance weeks before. Shaw agreed that not having done this was a mistake. The decision not to do it had been made because "everyone was under orders to preserve the semblance of normality in Palestine", "social life had to be allowed to continue" and because nobody had believed that the Irgun would put the whole of the Secretariat, which had many Jewish employees, in danger.<sup>[15]</sup>

Two months after the bombing, Shaw was appointed High Commissioner of Trinidad and Tobago. The Irgun immediately sent a letter bomb to him there, but it was intercepted and successfully disarmed.<sup>[14]</sup>

## Legacy and later reports

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### In Israeli history

The attack ramped up the conflict between Jewish militants and the Mandate government to a much higher level.<sup>[20]</sup> Early on July 30, 1946, in order to capture wanted underground members, 'Operation Shark' was mounted in Tel-Aviv. Four army brigades, about twenty thousand soldiers and police, established a cordon round the city. A historian later described the situation as looking for a few needles of militants in a haystack 170,000 people deep. Nearly eight hundred people were detained and then sent to Rafah detention camp.<sup>[15]</sup>



The attack led the British government to enact widely unpopular restrictions on the civil liberties of Jews in Palestine, which included a renewed use of random personal searches, random searches of homes, military curfews, road blocks, and mass arrests. The measures shifted British public opinion further against the Mandate system.<sup>[36]</sup> They also alienated the Jewish populace from their government, which had been Begin's intention from the beginning.<sup>[21]</sup>

The Irgun and Lehi stepped up their campaign after the bombing, committing a series of attacks.<sup>[20]</sup> According to *The Jerusalem Post*, the bombing represented the end of the united front that had existed between the Irgun and other Zionist groups such as the Haganah. From then on, the groups maintained a more adversarial relationship.<sup>[16]</sup> Irgun ex-members and sympathizers have argued that modern historical accounts in Israel are biased against them and in favor of more established groups such as the Haganah.<sup>[37]</sup>



Irgun emblem with Hebrew symbols used during its armed campaign

After the bombing, the hotel complex remained in use by the British until May 4, 1948. It served as an Israeli headquarters from the end of the Israeli War of Independence to the Six-Day War. Then, the Israelis reopened the hotel for commercial business. Recently, it has hosted visiting dignitaries and celebrities.<sup>[38]</sup>

## Terrorism

The bombing has been discussed in literature about the practice and history of terrorism. It has been called one of the most lethal terrorist attacks of the 20th century.<sup>[39]</sup>

Security analyst Bruce Hoffman wrote of the bombing in his book *Inside Terrorism* that: "Unlike many terrorist groups today, the Irgun's strategy was not deliberately to target or wantonly harm civilians. At the same time, though, the claim of Begin and other apologists that warnings were issued cannot absolve either the group or its commander for the ninety-one people killed and forty-five others injured ... Indeed, whatever nonlethal intentions the Irgun might or might not have had, the fact remains that a tragedy of almost unparalleled magnitude was inflicted ... so that to this day the bombing remains one of the world's single most lethal terrorist incidents of the twentieth century."<sup>[21]</sup>

Enders Walter and Todd Sandler theorized in a 2006 book on the political economy of terrorism that it provided a model for the terrorist bombings of the 1980s.<sup>[40]</sup> In another 2006 book, Gus Martin wrote that the attack is one of the best historical examples of successful terrorism, it having yielded, according to him, everything that the Irgun had wanted. He went on to compare the aftermath of the bombing to that of Carlos Marighella's campaign with the Brazilian Communist Party.<sup>[36]</sup>

The Irgun's activities were classed as terrorism by MI5.<sup>[41]</sup> The Irgun has been viewed as a terrorist organization or organization which carried out terrorist acts.<sup>[42][43]</sup> In particular the Irgun was branded a terrorist organisation by Britain,<sup>[44]</sup> the 1946 Zionist Congress<sup>[45]</sup> and the Jewish Agency.<sup>[46]</sup> Begin argued that terrorists and freedom fighters are differentiated in that terrorists deliberately try to target civilians, and that the Irgun was not guilty of terrorism since it supposedly tried to avoid civilian casualties.<sup>[47]</sup> At the events to mark the 60th anniversary of the attack, Benjamin Netanyahu, then chairman of Likud and Leader of the Opposition in the Knesset, opined that the bombing was a legitimate act with a military target, distinguishing it from an act of terror intended to harm civilians. He said, "Imagine that Hamas or Hizbullah would call the military headquarters in Tel Aviv and say, 'We have placed a bomb and we are asking you to evacuate the area.' They don't do that. That is the difference."<sup>[37]</sup>

Army and police reports

Various British government papers relating to the bombing were released under the thirty year rule in 1978, including the results of the military and police investigations.<sup>[note 2]</sup> The reports contain statements and conclusions which are contradicted by other evidence, including that submitted to the inquest held after the bombing. Affidavits which reflected badly on the security of the hotel were removed from the army report before it was submitted to the High Commissioner and then the Cabinet in London.<sup>[14]</sup> The police report makes the claim that the warning sent to the French Consulate was received five minutes *after* the main explosion. This is contradicted by multiple eyewitnesses who reported seeing staff opening the Consulate windows five minutes *before* it. The report also claims that the warning received by the *Palestine Post* was not received until after the explosion. That claim is supported in the report by the testimony of two members of the *Palestine Post* staff, one of whom said that she was put under pressure by the Palestine Police to withdraw statements she had made in her account.<sup>[14]</sup>

60th anniversary controversy

In July 2006, the Menachem Begin Heritage Center organized a conference to mark the 60th anniversary of the bombing. The conference was attended by past and future Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and former members of Irgun.<sup>[48]</sup> A plaque commemorating the bombing was unveiled, stating "For reasons known only to the British, the hotel was not evacuated." The British Ambassador in Tel Aviv and the Consul-General in Jerusalem protested, saying "We do not think that it is right for an act of terrorism, which led to the loss of many lives, to be commemorated", and wrote to the Mayor of Jerusalem that such an act of terror could not be honoured, even if it was preceded by a warning. The British government also demanded the removal of the plaque, pointing out that the statement accusing the British of failing to evacuate the hotel was untrue and "did not absolve those who planted the bomb."<sup>[48][49]</sup>

To prevent a diplomatic incident, and over the objections of Knesset member Reuven Rivlin (Likud), who raised the matter in the Knesset, changes were made in the plaque's text, though to a greater degree in the English than the Hebrew version. The final English version says, "Warning phone calls has [*sic*] been made to the hotel, The Palestine Post and the French Consulate, urging the hotel's occupants to leave immediately. The hotel was not evacuated and after 25 minutes the bombs exploded. To the Irgun's regret, 92 persons were killed." The death toll given includes Avraham Abramovitz, the Irgun member who was shot during the attack and died later from his wounds, but only the Hebrew version of the sign makes that clear.<sup>[37]</sup> The Hebrew version has the words meaning "including an Irgun man who was killed in a shootout which happened there" (Hebrew: כולל איש האצ"ל שנהרג בחילופי יריות שהתנהלו במקום) at the end, which are not found in the English version.

See also

- List of Irgun attacks
- List of Irgun members
- Violence in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict
- Zionist political violence



The hotel in 2008



The plaque of the King David Hotel. The Hebrew version has an additional line saying that among the 92 people killed was an Irgun member shot dead.

## Further reading

- Thurston Clarke, *By Blood and Fire*, G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1981
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- The Palestine Post (<https://web.archive.org/web/20081005195943/http://jpress.tau.ac.il/publications/PPost-en.asp>), Jerusalem: the newspaper reported on the inquest into the bombing throughout September 1946.
- The final findings of the inquest into the bombing: a copy is held by the State of Israel Archives, Jerusalem.
- Michael Quentin Morton, *In the Heart of the Desert*, Green Mountain Press, 2006, pp. 32–4 (photograph p. 44), for an eye-witness account of the immediate aftermath of the bombing by a geologist working for the Iraq Petroleum Company.

## In media

- Exodus* (1960), Hollywood film with Paul Newman, directed by Otto Preminger
- The Promise* (2001), a British television serial in four episodes written and directed by Peter Kosminsky
- In the Name of Liberation: Freedom by Any Means, one of the documentaries from the series The Age of Terror: A Survey of modern terrorism (2002) produced by Films Media Group*
- Early Israeli Terrorism* (2009), a BBC documentary
- Footage of the bombed hotel collapsing opens episode 2 of *Foyle's War* series eight (January 11, 2015)
- "Last Night We Attacked: A Photographic Record of Fighting Resistance in Palestine" (1947), 35 mm film prepared by the American League for a Free Palestine, edited by Elizabeth Wheeler, written by Larry Ravitz, narrated by Quentin Reynolds & Bill Parker, copyright 2010 NCJF.

## Endnotes

- The original letter can be found in the *Jabotinsky Institute Archives* (k-4 1/11/5).
- A copy of the police report (identifying code 'CO 537 2290') is held at the Public Record Office, London.

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- International Terrorism Since 1945 (<http://www.bbcactive.com/BroadCastLearning/asp/catalogue/productdetail.asp?productcode=22054>) - The King David Hotel bombing features in the first episode of a 2008 BBC series which investigates the motives, morals and methods of some of what the BBC describes as the most infamous terrorist attacks of recent times.
- UK national archives, Mi5 files of Jewish Interest. (<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/releases/2006/march/jewish.htm>) Includes intelligence about the activities of the Irgun.

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